

Stories

966 words

“I owe him my life,” My grandfather began. With a distant look in his eyes, a small, grateful smile curved his lips. “It may be hard to believe, but I escaped that camp because of a Nazi soldier. He was young, couldn’t have been more than twenty years old. Still a fledgling and yet he was willing to risk everything—his honor, even his life—for a boy he knew only by the number on his arm.”

“They got away, and that’s what matters,” he thought.

He paused for a moment as if struggling to recall that eventful day. Or at least struggling to tell it. Taking a deep breath, he continued, “I was only twelve at the time and had been in that camp for almost a year. I remember that day was especially hot, the work was especially grueling, and the pang of hunger was especially strong. I was hiding by the fence during the work hours behind some concrete blocks when he found me. I had never been so scared before in my life, and I don’t think I have been so scared since.

“He was tall and strong, well-fed and well-trained like all the other Nazi soldiers. He towered over me as I sat there trembling on the ground. He looked around, and then knelt down beside me. I expected him to beat me, to yell at me, but he simply asked ‘How old are you?’ I could barely get the word out, I was so afraid. Then, he looked me in the eye and said ‘I’m going to get you out of here. Wait here.’”

The young man approached the gallows.

“Well I couldn’t believe my ears. This man said he was going to get me out! I didn’t know if I should believe him or not, but I sure as hell wasn’t about to disobey him, so when he

left me sitting in the dirt, I stayed in the dirt. It felt like I sat there for hours, though it must've been only a few minutes before he came back. When he returned, he was carrying a burlap sack.

“He thrust the sack into my arms and said ‘Wait until everyone is gone, then you’re going to take the sack and walk down the fence until you reach a single cinderblock with an “X” marked in the dirt behind it. There is a hole in the bottom of the fence; you should fit under it. There’s a new set of clothes in the sack. Get into the woods, put them on, and bury your uniform. There is a town about five kilometers away straight ahead; go straight to it and look for the house with the red door. Someone will help you there.’ He spoke quickly. His face was stern, but his eyes...”

My grandfather stopped.

“What? What about them?” I asked.

“They were so full of hope and life.” His voice started to shake. “I owe him everything, Max. You need to understand that! I can never repay this man for what he has done!”

I was surprised by my grandfather’s outburst, taken aback by the sudden surge of emotion. I didn’t know what to say. There was nothing I could say.

Taking a steadying breath, he continued the story.

“He looked me in the eye, put a reassuring hand on my shoulder, and said, ‘You’re going to be okay.’ And then he was gone.”

He mounted the chair and watched the world go dark as a blindfold covered his eyes.

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“Then I did as he told me. I buried my uniform, ran to the town, and found the red door. I knocked and was answered by a middle-aged woman. When she opened the door, I said, ‘My name is Bruno Zimmerman. He said you would help me.’”

My grandfather looked down into his lap, only then did I notice his hands were shaking.

He took another steadying breath and said, “Tears immediately filled the woman’s eyes, and she gave me a sad smile. ‘Come in, darling,’ she said. ‘We’re just sitting down for supper.’”

“I helped six. Six is greater than one. Better me than them,” he thought, trembling.

“It wasn’t until later that I learned he sent me to his own mother. She was as kind as he was. She took care of me along with five other children. Apparently he had gotten them out, too. She hid us until the war ended many months later and then tried to reunite us with any family members she could find. She found my sister.”

He let out a painful sigh.

“I’m afraid, however, that she was never reunited with her own family... her boy never came home.”

He felt the rope slip over his head and tighten around his neck.

“What happened to him?” I whispered. I was almost afraid to ask, afraid of the answer.

Grandpa slowly shook his head. “There’s no way to know.”

A sad silence filled the room, choking out the sunlight and hushing the birds. My grandpa sat there, remembering, unsure of how to continue.

“What did you do next?” I heard myself ask.

“I left. My sister and I hopped on a boat and came here to America. We left it all behind, tried to start over. We made lives for ourselves, I met your grandmother, and we started a family. We left the past behind. We survived.”

“And that’s it? The end?” I said quietly.

He gently nodded his head. “That’s the end of my story.”

I sat there in silence, pondering my grandfather’s words.

“Now what?”

“Now it’s time that you write your own history. But when you do, remember what I told you today, and make sure there are no more stories like mine.”

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